

The Bloomfield Times.

FRANK MORTIMER,
Editor and Proprietor.

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BY

FRANK MORTIMER.

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The Bank Robbery!

A GOOD STORY.

CONCLUDED.

"WHAT is a boy all over," exclaimed he, under his breath. "He goes to Tinborough to dance and eat strawberries, and he carries a pistol, loaded I dare say to the muzzle. It is ten to one he will shoot himself or his sweetheart before the evening is over."

As Mr. Houghton fumbled over the bureau, his hand encountered a covered flask. Even his unaccustomed nose was able to recognize at once, its contents as whiskey; and his regret at such a discovery in his son's room was lost in the joy with which he hailed a stimulant so greatly needed to put his nerves in condition for the events to come. Perhaps he forgot how long it was since he had called in such a reinforcement; perhaps his hand shook; perhaps he thought the occasion required a large dose. He took a hearty one; and when he was down stairs again the difficulties in the way of bagging the burglars vanished from his mind. He was a young man once more, and entered into the romance of Bixby's plot, he said to himself, as enthusiastically as Harry would have done. He paced the room with an elastic stride, very different from the nervous, wavering step with which he had heard the news. Bixby and himself, he thought, would be enough to overpower any three burglars. Then his head was heavy, and he felt drowsy. To be in proper condition for the emergency, he reflected, he needed all the sleep he could get. The resolve was one to be executed as promptly as formed; and a few minutes later, the cashier had locked the door, fastened the lower windows, and was snugly in bed.

A gentle tinkle of the door-bell aroused him again before, as it seemed to him, he had fairly closed his eyes. "The robbers at last," he thought; and then he rebuked himself for the absurdity of supposing that a burglar would announce his coming by the door-bell. "It is Bixby, of course," he said to himself, "come to own he was a fool and the story all nonsense." But he paused before he turned the key, and said in his fiercest tone, "Who is there?"

"It is only me, Foster," said the sweet, familiar voice of his wife, without; and when he had admitted her she told him, in her quick way, that after she had watched with the child an hour or two, a professional nurse who had been sent for a week before, had arrived unexpectedly, and that she had been glad to give up her vigil and come home.

Foster Houghton rarely did anything without thinking twice about it, if not more; so it came about that while he balanced in his mind the pros and cons as to revealing to his wife the secret which Bixby had confided to him, and thus giving her a fright in advance for what might prove to be a false alarm after all, the tired lady went sound asleep; and thus the scale was turned in favor of reticence. Perhaps the husband's continued drowsiness contributed to the resolve also; for his eyelids still drooped with strange obstinacy, and an influence more powerful than even the apprehension of danger transformed his terrors into dreams.

One, two, three out from the Belfry on the breathless June night, already heavy with the rising fog from the river. Foster Houghton found himself broad awake as he counted the strokes; but even while he thought it was the clock that had disturbed him, he felt a cold, hard ring of steel against his temple, and saw through the darkness, a man by his bedside.

"Not one word, or you will never utter another."

He noted the voice even in the whirl of the moment, and knew that it was strange to him. He turned towards his wife and saw that there was a man by her side also, with a revolver aimed; felt, rather than saw that she had waked when he did, and was awaiting, self-possessed, for whatever was to come. As the darkness yielded to his eyes, he was aware of a third figure, standing at the window.

"Perfectly quiet, remember, and we will tell you what is to be done," said the same voice, cool, firm, with an utterance entirely distinct, yet hardly louder than a whisper. You have nothing to fear if you obey orders. A knife is ready for the heart of each if you disobey. The lady has simply to lie still; as she will be bound to the bed and her mouth stopped, that will be easy; and the gag is very gentle, and will not hurt if she does not resist. Mr. Houghton will rise, put on his trousers, and go with us to the bank, always in range of this pistol and in reach of this blade. The keys are already in my pocket. Number Three, will you scratch a match that I may help the gentleman to his clothes."

The figure in the window stepped noiselessly forward at the summons. As the blue flame lighted the room Foster Houghton observed that his visitors were all masked with black silk, through which a narrow split permitted vision. He noticed that their feet were shod with listing, so thick that a step made no audible sound upon the straw carpet. He noticed that long, thin, black cloaks covered their forms to the ankles, so that no details of clothing could be noted to identify them. And while he observed these things, not venturing to stir until the threatening muzzle was withdrawn from his face, he felt his hand tightly clutched by the fingers of his wife beneath the coverlid.

Years of familiar association had made him apt at interpreting his wife's thoughts and feelings without the aid of the spoken word. Either by some peculiar expression in the grasp itself, or by that subtle magnetism which we know exists among the unknown forces, he felt that there was something more than natural terror of the moment, more than the courage of a heart ever braver than his own, more than sympathy for his own supposed dismay, in his wife's snatch at his hand. More alarmed, at the instant, by the shock thus given him by the more palpable danger, he turned his head towards his wife again, and in her eyes and in the direction they gave to his, saw all that she had seen.

The masked figure in the centre of the room, in producing a match, had unwittingly thrown back one side of its cloak. By the sickly flame just turning to white, Foster Houghton saw, thus revealed, the twisted chain he had played with in his own boyhood, the golden crescent with his

mother's hair, the massive key with its seal, just as he had seen them on his boy's breast at sun-set. In an instant more a taper was lighted; the curtain of the cloak was drawn together again. But the secret it had exposed was impressed upon two hearts as if they had been seared with iron.

As a drowning man thinks of the crowded events of a lifetime, Foster Houghton thought in that moment of supreme agony of a dozen links of circumstantial evidence—the boy's baffled desire for money, his angry words, his evil associates, his missing revolver, his deliberate explanation of a night-long absence, his intimate knowledge of the affairs of the bank, except the secret combination of the lock, which he had often teased for in vain. Two things were stamped upon his brain together, and he was thankful that his wife could know the horror of but one of them.

His own son was engaged in a plot to rob the bank, by threats of assassination against those who gave him life.

He himself was irrevocably enlisted in a plot to capturing the robbers, and so bring his boy to infamy and punishment worse than death.

The discovery compels a pause in the narrative. It made none in the actual progress of events. The man who had spoken motioned cashier to rise, and assisted his trembling hands in covering his limbs with one or two articles of clothing. The one on the opposite side of the bed, moving quickly and deftly as a sailor, bound Mrs. Houghton where she lay without a touch of rudeness or indignity beyond what his task made necessary. A knotted handkerchief from his pocket, was tied across her mouth. The third figure stood at the window, either to keep a watch without, or to avoid seeing what took place within; but Foster Houghton's eyes could see no tremor, no sign of remorse or hesitation, in its bearing.

"Now, cashier," said the one voice which alone had been heard since the stroke of the clock, "you will have to consider yourself ready, for we have no time to spare. I feel sure you know what is healthy for you, but still I will tie this rope around your waist to save you from any dangerous temptation to try a side street. Number Two, you will go below, and see that the coast is clear."

With one look at his wife's eyes, in which he saw outraged motherly affection, where the strangers saw only fright and pain, Foster Houghton suffered himself to be led from the room. One of the robbers had preceded him; one held him tightly by the wrist; one, the one whose presence gave the scene its treble terror, remained only long enough to lock the door. The outer door was fastened behind them also; and then the noiseless little procession (for the cashier had been permitted to put on his stockings only) filed along the gravel walk, through the pitchy blackness which a mist gives to a moonless night, toward the solitary brick building occupied by the Blue River National Bank.

They passed the school-house where Foster Houghton had carried his boy a dozen years before with a bright new primer clutched in his frightened little fingers; then the desolate old mansion of his own father, where the lad had been petted and worshiped as fervently as at home; a little farther on, the church, where the baby had been baptised, and where the youth had chafed beneath distasteful sermons—its white steeple lost in the upper darkness; and, a few paces beyond, the academy, within whose walls the cashier had listened with such pride to his Harry's eloquent declamation of "The Return of Regulus to Carthage," on the last Commencement day. He thought of these things as they passed, though so many other thoughts surged in his mind; and he wondered if another heart beside his own was beset with such reminiscences on the silent journey.

Before they had reached the bank the man who had gone on in advance rejoined them.

"It's all serene," he said in a low tone, but with a coarser voice and utterance than his confederates; "nothing more than a cat stirring. I should have unhitched the mare, but we should be off in fifteen minutes."

"All right, Number Two," said the leader. "The swag will be in the buggy in less time. Cashier, you are a man of prudence, I know. If you work that combination skillfully and promptly not a hair of your head shall be harmed. If you make a blunder that costs us a minute, not only will this knife find its way to your heart, but we shall stop on our way back and set your cottage on fire. Our retreat will be covered, and you know the consequences there before the alarm will arouse anybody. I have sworn to do it."

Foster Houghton fancied he saw a shudder in the slighter figure beside him; but it might have been a puff of wind across the long drapery.

"Oh, blow the threats!" said Number Two. "The man values his life, and he is going to open the safe quicker than he ever did before. Open the door, young one, and let us be about it." The robber who had not yet opened his lips, and whose every motion the cashier watched steadily, stepped forward to the bank door, and as he drew a key from under his cloak the prisoner caught another glimpse of the chain he could have sworn to among a thousand.

The door swung open. The cashier's heart was in his throat. He had not heard a sound of Bixby; but he knew the village constable too well to fear, or hope, that he might have given up the chase. All four entered the building; but before the door could be closed behind them there was a shout, a cry of dismay, a rush of heavy feet, a flash of light in a lantern which gleamed but a moment before it was extinguished, the confused sound of blows and oaths, and the breaking of glass, punctuated by the sharp report of a pistol. Foster Houghton could never give a clear account of a terrible minute in which his consciousness seemed partly benumbed. He took no part in the struggle, but seemed to be pushed outside the door; and there, as the tumult within began to diminish, Silas Bixby came hurriedly to him, dragging a masked figure by the shoulder.

"Houghton, you must help a little.—We have got the better of 'em, and my men are holding the two big fellows down. But the fight is not out of them yet, and you must hold this little one three minutes while I help to tie their hands. Just hold this pistol to his head, and he will rest very easy."

Even while he spoke, Bixby was inside the door again, and the gleam of light which followed showed that he had recovered his lantern and meant to do his work thoroughly.

Foster Houghton's left hand had been guided to the collar of his captive, and the revolver had been thrust into his right.—There was no question of the composure of the robber now. He panted and sobbed and shook, and made no effort to tear himself from the feeble grasp that confined him.

If the cashier had been irresolute all his life he did not waver for an instant now.—He did not query within himself what was his duty, or what was prudent, or what his wife would advise, or what the bank directors would think.

"Harry," he whispered hoarsely, his lips close to the mask, "I know you."

The shrinking figure gave one great sob. Foster Houghton went on without pausing.

"Bixby does not know you, and there is time to escape yet. I shall fire this pistol in the air. Run for your life to your horse there, and push on to Tinborough. You can catch the train. May God forgive you!"

The figure caught the hand which had released its hold as the words were spoken, and kissed it. Then, turning back as if upon a sudden impulse, the robber mur-

mured something which could not be understood, and thrust it to the cashier's hand a mass of chilly metal which his intuition rather than his touch recognized as Peleg Houghton's watch and chain. He had presence of mind enough to conceal it in his pocket, and then he fired the pistol, and he heard the sound of flying feet and rattling wheels as Silas Bixby accosted him.

"What in thunder! did he wriggle away from you? Why didn't you sing out sooner?"

"I think I am getting faint. In Heaven's name, go quick to my house and release my wife, and tell her all is safe. The fright of these shots will kill her."

Foster Houghton sunk into a swoon even as he spoke, and only the quick arm of Silas Bixby saved him from a fall on the stone steps.

"See here, boys," said he, "if you have got those fellows tied up tight, one of you take 'Squire Houghton and bring him to, and I'll go over to his house and untie his wife before I start after that pesky little rascal that has got away. If I had supposed he would dare risk the pistol, I should have hung on to him myself. Mike, you just keep your revolver cocked, and if either of those men more than winks, shoot him where he lies."

Having thus disposed of his forces and provided for the guard of his prisoners and the restoration of the disabled, the commander was off at a run.

Half of Elmfield seemed to have been awakened by the shots, and he was met by a dozen half-clad men and boys whom he sent on this errand and that, to open the lock-up under the engine house, to harness horses for the pursuit, vouchsafing only very curt replies to their eager questions as to what had happened. He was exasperated on arriving at Foster Houghton's dwelling to find the door locked and the windows fastened. So he raised a stentorian shout of, "It's—all—right—Mrs.—Houghton. Robbers—caught—and nobody hurt," separating his words carefully to insure being understood, and then scud at full speed back toward the bank again. He met half-way an excited and talkative little group, the central figure of which was the cashier of the bank, restored to life, but still white as death, and supported by friendly hands. Assured that Houghton himself was now able to release his wife, Bixby ran on to the green, and in five minutes more was settled in his gig, and urging his cheerful little bay Morgan over the road to Tinborough, mentally putting into form his narrative for the *Trumpet* as he went.

Thus it came about that it was Foster Houghton himself who unlocked his wife's bonds—bending his gray head, as he did so, to print a kiss of sorrow and sympathy on her wrinkled cheek, and leaving a tear there.

"He has escaped," he said, "and is on the road to the station."

"Will he not be overtaken?"

"I think not. He has a fair start, and knows what is at stake; and the train passes through before daylight."

Then the woman's heart, which had borne her bravely up so far, gave way, and she broke into terrible sobs; and the husband who would comfort her was himself overcome by the common grief, and could not speak a word. Silently they suffered together, pressing hands, until the entering light of dawn reminded them that even this day had duties, and perhaps new phases of sorrow.

They could bear the quick steps of passers evidently full of excitement over the event of the night, and talking all together.—They could not be long left undisturbed.—As they dressed, Foster Houghton—unable or reluctant to describe the scene at the bank, as his wife was to ask about it—suddenly encountered in his pocket the watch, entangled in its chain.

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